

Ceann Sibeal Golf Course offers classic taste of Ireland

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DINGLE, Ireland (Sept. 18, 2003) -- "Where is Dick Mack's? Across from the church.

Where is the church? Across from Dick Mack's."

Such a mirthful and splendid sign can be found on the side of the very pub in question in Dingle, County Kerry -- a quaint fishing village on the westernmost peninsula of the Republic of Ireland. Be advised, however, that this playful display is one of the few signs you'll see on the Dingle Peninsula written in English. Gaelic, or Gaeltecht -- the Irish language, is still freely spoken, and sung, for that matter, throughout this isolated, rugged region and in an Daingean -- Dingle Town.

We know Dick Mack's is across from the church, but where is the golf course?

Only three roads lead out of town, and the westbound Sleah Head Route leads over a bridge and eventually through Baile an Fheirteigh -- the tiny village of Ballyferriter. A bit beyond there, once the golf traveler sees nothing in any direction except mountains, the Atlantic Ocean and the rocky buttes that rise from it, and the wide, fresh sky, is Ceann Sibeal Golf Course.

Ceann Sibeal translates to Sybil Head, the towering, craggy headlands that stand impervious to the smashing of the Atlantic, sometimes as much as 500 feet below. Visitors who've ventured the narrow, winding and sometimes hair-raising roads out to this sliver of the world will want to make time to tour the peninsula and allow themselves to be transfixed by the majesty that confronts them.

But first, the golf.

Ceann Sibeal was founded in 1924. The great Irish architect Eddie Hackett, who passed away in 1996 at the age of 86, is credited as the architect, who designed other favorites such as Carne, Connemara, Enniscrone, and the acclaimed Waterville Golf Links. Ireland's beloved Ryder Cup hero Christy O'Connor Jr. oversaw a modern-day update in the 1990s. Not to worry, though, the links look as if they were laid out by Mother Nature herself, who makes presence known most every Dingle day in the forms of wind, mist, fog, rain, and majestic clouds.

The par-72, 6,696 yards of pastoral golf holes are welcoming and walkable, spilling down from the clubhouse across the open, visible land. A burn winds throughout the course and the routing takes full advantage of it, strategically bringing it into play on many of the holes. Truth be known, the holes don't even need the burn, because the shot values, presentation and challenge are entirely fulfilling. While better-known courses on many tourist "rotas" such as Ballybunion, Tralee, Waterville and the Old Head of Kinsale play directly along the ocean, Ceann Sibeal, or Dingle Golf Links, if you must, though surrounded by ocean, is set back from the sea. Visible still, is the ocean and the now lifeless and often unreachable Blasket Islands, abandoned only in 1960 after so many of its primitive residents perished in wild winters that kept help, food and mail from coming for weeks.

Golfers, too, embrace a sense of timelessness at Ceann Sibeal because nothing other than bare mountains, the distant farmhouse and pure golf is visible. The two-story clubhouse, though at the highest spot on the property, is built into the hill and tastefully low profile.

Players pulling a trolley will climb the ninth hole toward the clubhouse to end the opening loop, and then set back out with a tricky, long shot on An Tiaracht, the 197-yard par-3 10th hole played to a hidden green. The terror of the blind shot is calmed by a mound behind the green that stops any shots that are too long. With modern earth moving equipment, no designer should build a hole like

this today, but in an ancient setting like the Dingle Peninsula, it is innately understood and appreciated.

Ann Eascu, the 405-yard par-4 15th hole, is one of the world's original risk/reward holes. A stream twisting into play along the right side of the hole can be carried -- unless the wind is blowing against tee shots, when the wise play is the longer passage to the left. The two-tiered green is surely a result of O'Connor's update, and the added pizzazz is as understandable as the curious nature of the 10th hole.

Those who leave Ireland's headliner courses are often left with the memory of awesome landscape, towering dunes and crashing seascape. Ceann Sibeal overpowers one with a sense of heavenly quiet and pleasant subtlety. The course and the setting are absent the hustle and bustle of Ballybunion, the commercialism of Killarney, and the manufactured feeling of Tralee.

The heartier traveler might consider an alternate, even more scenic route back into Dingle Town. Just be sure there is plenty of daylight remaining.

"That road is lethal enough during the day," warned a local at the petrol station when asked about the famed Connor Pass. The conventional and scenic road that rings the peninsula offers isolated and stunning ocean views the entire way, better than anything the much-publicized "Ring of Kerry" can offer. The Connor Pass, however, passes over the Dingle Peninsula running north and south instead of around. The desperately narrow, winding road, sometimes allowing only one car to pass, rises up gradually against a rock mountain wall until, at its summit, one can loosen their white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel and pull over into a small car park. From there, the entire peninsula and the ocean surrounding to the north and the south can be gazed upon. Only the sound of the wind and the bleating of high altitude sheep and goats can be heard.

Dingle Town lies down below to the south, and the Connor Pass road ends there on Main Street, the town's colorful and lively center street. Pub after pub offers spontaneous music each evening, sometimes simply the haunting lone voice of a patron singing a baleful Gaelic ballad or a young lad playing the pennywhistle. It's noticeable that during these musical sessions, patrons remain quiet and give their full attention, so much so that in some of the cozy places a microphone is not needed.

O'Flahery's Pub, with its stone floor and snug just inside the front door, is not to be missed. Newspapers framed on the wall recount the murderous march of the "Black and Tans," so named for the colors of their British Army uniforms. If you want a glass of half Guinness/half Harp, refer to it as a "Half and Half," not a "Black and Tan."

Once in Dingle, everything is within walking distance -- from the waterfront wharf to the woolen shops to the quiet guesthouses just outside town, and even to a tiny, 18-hole pitch-and-putt course just to the left after the town's second of two roundabouts.

Wandering from pub to pub is joyful and fun, and though Dick Mack's is not to be missed, visitors might feel slightly awkward when they first step in. Dick Mack's hosts a decidedly local crowd, and without any music or entertainment, it is quiet even when crowded. The pub was, at one time, a cobbler's shop by day. Dual use like that was common, and at Dick's the shoes, boots and workbenches remain, along with two small snugs that were designed to, at one time, contain the womenfolk. Those who try not to be intimidated in this very intimate setting will find conversation quickly, even if it is only jokes from the bartender, which may be difficult to understand given the thick brogue it's likely to be told in. It is advised to laugh at the indiscernible punch line, anyway.

Ask the bartender to see Christy O'Connor's jug, and with some glee, he'll pull out a small, ceramic creamer with a Galway Bay Golf Club logo on the side that was snatched from Christy O'Connor Jr. when he frequented Dick's while working on Ceann Sibeal.

"Tell him nothing," the bartender will plead. (In case you should run across O'Connor!)

Directions

Dingle can be reached by car from the following airports: -Kerry Airport. Follow signs to Castlemaine, Inch and then Dingle. (1-hour drive) -Shannon Airport. Follow signs to Limerick, Tralee, and then Dingle. (2.5 hour drive) -Cork Airport. Follow N 22 to Killarney, Milltown, Castlemaine, Inch and then Dingle. (2.5-hour drive)

Stay and play

No packages needed, but guesthouse owners and hotel clerks will be happy to help with your arrangements.

The Tower View Inn, walking distance from town, is a beautiful an Irish home in a quiet setting with mountain and water views. Mrs. Mary Griffin and her charming family take special care of the house and its guests, offering modern en-suite rooms with plenty of privacy, a spacious yard with goats, sheep and horses in the back.

TowerviewDingle@eircom.net or phone 353 (0) 66 742-3815.

Those who prefer a hotel setting directly in town would be advised to try Dingle Benner's Hotel. Benner's features a gourmet restaurant and full bar that stays open late for hotel guests. There are many rooms, each of them appointed in a charming fashion. Mr. Gareth Anthony is the resident manager. info@dinglebenners.com, dinglebenners.com, or call 353 (0) 66 9151412.

Chow

Dingle's two best restaurants are right next to each other near the top of Main Street: Doyle's Seafood Bar, and The Half Door - a favorite of Christy O'Connor's. Reservations are advised for either, since they are both intimate and service oriented. Sean Cluskey, who owns Doyle's is the unofficial mayor of Dingle - stay for a drink after dinner to hear his humor, opinion and local knowledge.

Doyle's Seafood Bar - 353 (0) 66 9151174 DoylesofDingle.com cdoyles@iol.ie.

The Half Door - Denis and Teresa O'Connor 353 (0) 66 51600.

Any opinions expressed above are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the management. The information in this story was accurate at the time of publication.

Scores out of 5 for Dingle Links:

SCORECARD
Value: 5
Design: 5
Conditions: 4
Service: 5
Overall: 4.75